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San Francisco Chronicle

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Fire under control at East Bay refinery



Photos by Noah Berger/Special to the Chronicle

Smoke billows from a fire Saturday at Martinez Refining Co. in Contra Costa County. Company officials said the fire was under control by early Sunday. The cause of the blaze is under investigation..

'Residual smoke and flaring' possible, company officials say

By Maliya Ellis
and Julie Johnson

The fire that erupted Saturday afternoon at the Martinez Refining Co.'s facility in Contra Costa County was under control by early Sunday, company officials said, though they warned that "residual smoke and flaring" are possible.

The fire injured six people and spewed black smoke into the surrounding community, prompt-



The fire prompted a shelter-in-place alert as it spewed black smoke into the community.

ing a nearly five-hour shelter-in-place alert for adjacent neighborhoods as well as road closures.

The blaze broke out around 1:47 p.m., officials said, sending out plumes of black smoke and hundreds of pounds of sulphur dioxide. The blaze was contained to the refinery, with company fire personnel and firefighters from the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District combating the

Fire continues on A7

Storms to precede dry turn for state

Several inches of rain expected
in north during month's first half

By Greg Porter

After an exceptionally dry January, February will feature significantly more rain chances for much of California, at least for the first part of the month.

Northern California, including the Bay Area, can expect several inches of rain from a multitude of storm systems for the first half of February, with several feet of snow falling across the Sierra.

But the abundance of precipitation likely won't last.

By the end of February, all signs point to another period of mild and dry weather extending across much of the state.

The ridge of high pressure that dominated the West Coast throughout January will begin to break down in early February and shift westward, positioning itself over the Pacific Ocean. This shift will allow storm systems to move into California during the first two weeks of the month.

"With the ridge retrograding a little bit off the coast, and with a strong trough expected over the northwestern part of the country, we're expecting to see the storm track more likely to go through Northern California and Oregon," said Anthony Artusa, a meteorologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Weather continues on A6

Deaths on beach raise questions on safety measures

By Nora Mishanec

A secluded beach 3 miles south of Half Moon Bay has claimed the lives of at least four people since 2018. Those who perished were either a child swept into the waters or an adult who rushed to save them.

The most recent deaths came on Jan. 19, when rescuers pulled the bodies of 8-year-old Vihaan Mukund and his father, Mukund Kalyanaraman Murali, 39, from the ocean after the pair were fatally swept into the waves on the rocky San Mateo County coastline.

Their deaths came four years after a 12-year-old boy disappeared in the water while playing at the beach in January 2021. Despite extensive search and rescue efforts, Arunay Pruthi's body was never found.

The deaths and their disquieting parallels prompted fresh questions about what more could have been done to prevent the latest fatalities at one of the Bay Area's notoriously steep pocket beaches, so-called for their isolated locations between two headlands. Mukund and Murali died during what National Weather

Beach continues on A8

Video offers clue in killings tied to group

By Matthias Gafni
and Michael Barba

Around the time a Pennsylvania couple was shot dead in their home on New Year's Eve of 2022 — an attack now linked to a series of killings and a fringe group in the Bay Area — a neighbor's doorbell camera captured a

shout.

At 11:31 p.m., investigators said, a higher-pitched voice shouted what sounded like "Mom!" and then exclaimed less than 30 seconds later, "Oh, my God! Oh, God, God!"

Yet it was not until Jan. 2, 2023, that the victims' bodies were found and the crime reported.

The recording was among the evidence cited by authorities investigating the murders of Richard and Rita Zajko to obtain a warrant to search the Vermont home of Michelle "Jamie" Zajko, the daughter of the couple who has been named a "person of interest" in the case, according to newly

released court records. She had turned 30 on that New Year's Eve.

The records provide the clearest picture yet of a case that detectives have linked to four other violent deaths, including the recent slaying of a Vallejo landlord and a recent Vermont shootout that left a

Killings continues on A7

Rising cocoa costs biting chocolatiers

Area businesses face decisions on
prices; climate change hitting farms

By Mario Cortez

The best-selling item at Rory's Bakehouse in Napa is also its most classic: chocolate chip cookies. But the price of their star ingredient continues to rise. Owner Rory Kandel is now paying double what she was for chocolate when she opened in 2023.

"If this rise in chocolate prices continues, it's going to put me in a position where I don't know if I'll be able to continue," she said.

World cocoa prices

have spiked to extreme levels in recent years as a result of climate change, and higher prices could put an extra squeeze on wallets as Valentine's Day approaches. Cocoa futures on the Intercontinental Exchange, considered a benchmark for cocoa prices, are up more than 300% over the past two years.

Kandel, who uses around 40 pounds of chocolate each week, has also had to deal with higher prices for eggs, which are spiking fourfold due to

Cocoa continues on A8



Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

Midnight Citizen is from Luis Villavelazquez, owner of Bellaria Dessert Studio. He says he has been told this year's cocoa crop would be pricier.

